

The Well-Tempered Clavier is one of J. S. Bach's most famous works; it is also one of the most famous of all keyboard compositions. Originally it comprised 24 Preludes and Fugues, one pair in each major and minor key; 22 years after it was first issued Bach brought out another set of 24 preludes and fugues on a similar scheme, but without using the former title. Its correspondence to the earlier set was nevertheless so obvious that, by common consent, it has always been called "Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II," while the earlier set is referred to as Book I.

Serious students of the keyboard instruments have long regarded the volumes of these preludes and fugues as a sort of Bible: like other sacred scriptures it has become an object of reverence even on the part of persons who are familiar with only a fraction of its contents; like other Bibles it contains passages of text which are in dispute and concerning which there are varieties of interpretation. Like the Bible, its lofty thought and its matchless turn of phrase have provided unfailing exaltation of spirit to those blessed with the capacity of being moved by them.

The original German title of the work is: "*Das Wohl-temperirte clavier . . .*" in rendering it into English this writer prefers to leave the word "*Clavier*" untranslated. What is a "*clavier*"? In 1722 when Bach composed his celebrated work, it was a German word meaning any keyboard or keyboard instrument. Sometimes "*clavier*" was used to designate the manuals of an organ; mostly, however, "*clavier*" was a generic term given to either of the domestic keyboard instruments in principal use at the time. These were the harpsichord and the clavichord. We cannot here go into all the details of the differences between them: suffice it to say that in a harpsichord the strings are *plucked* by a quill plectra fastened to the ends of uprights jacks, while in a clavichord the strings are *struck* by thin metal blades called "tangents." A quill and jack of fixed size will pluck a string just so far, and no more or less, regardless of the muscular force applied, consequently a harpsichord was almost incapable of shading the tone by means of the finger alone.

Nevertheless, in the early decades of the 18th century the harpsichord was generally regarded as by far the superior instrument. It gave forth a clear bright sound of considerable volume; larger instruments were provided with several complete sets of strings tuned in unisons and also octaves, which created "stops" analogous to those of the organ, and were thereby capable of producing a significant amount of sonorous variety, albeit in a somewhat stiff, sudden fashion.

The clavichord, on the other hand, had a very weak, poor tone; it was too faint to be heard in any ensemble at all; mostly it was useful for playing alone for one's self. Yet it had two great advantages: one was that it was cheap, the other was that, within very narrow limits, its volume responded to the strength of impact of the player's fingers. In other words it was capable of a rather subtle flexible crescendo and diminuendo between the range of what we would now call *pp* and *ppp*. When pianofortes began to become more widespread in Germany toward the middle of the 18th century, they too were taken in under the general designation of "*clavier*." Nowadays "*clavier*" means pianoforte almost exclusively.

Thus if one wanted to be pedantically exact, one would translate, “*Das Wohltemperirte Clavier*” as: “The Well-Tempered Harpsichord, Clavichord, or Pianoforte.” We bring all this up in order to explain that the common English translation: “Well-Tempered Clavichord,” while not utterly inaccurate, is nevertheless incomplete and misleading. So also for the same reason is the common French version: “*Le clavecin bien tempere,*” – “*clavecin*” meaning harpsichord.

Use of the translation “clavichord” seems to have sprung from a widely current tradition to the effect that the clavichord was Bach’s favorite instrument. We may say that this tradition has now been pretty well invalidated by reputable modern scholars. It probably originated with Bach’s son Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, himself a great devotee of the clavichord, and whose memory may have become pliable by the time he made his statements to the musicologist Dr. Forkel, late in life. The fact that an inventory of J. Sebastian Bach’s property at his death revealed that he had owned no fewer than six keyboard instruments, all of them harpsichords, not one of them a clavichord.

Yet without regarding the clavichord as Bach’s favorite, it seems altogether likely that he did play it occasionally, and with pleasure. It is hard to resist the notion that a few of the more poignantly expressive preludes of Book I, such as the ones in E-flat minor and in B-flat minor, were written with the touch-responsive clavichord in mind.

Bach certainly played a pianoforte once in his life. He was then elderly, and showed no great interest in the new-fangled instrument at that early stage of its development; yet there is no reason to think he would have objected to hearing his preludes and fugues performed on it. We must, however, make a large reservation when we say this. No instrument of the mid-18th century could be remotely compared with the giant into which the *modern* piano has developed, – with its enormous brass-overspun bass strings, its three-fold steel in the treble, its heavy felt-covered hammers and its iron frame withstanding a tension of 20 tons.

One hardly needs to remind music students that it was not Bach who devised the compromise system of tuning keyboard instruments which is known as “equal temperament.” It had been in partial use for some generations before Bach’s time; it was intended as an improvement on the older tuning practice known as the “mean tone” system. Under the latter, many tones were left in an intolerable state of falsity. Thus with the older tuning, a keyboard instrument could be played only in certain “good” keys, usually those with signatures of three accidentals of less. Under the “equal temperament,” however, the natural discrepancy inherent in all our scales was even distributed over the entire keyboard; the inevitable error then became so slight at any given interval as to be acceptable to most, though not to all, ears. Evidently it was acceptable to Bach, about the sensitiveness of whose hearing nobody has ever recorded any complaints. On an “equal-tempered” or “well-tempered” clavier, then, it was possible to play as conveniently in six sharps or flats as in one or none. That was the meaning behind Bach’s plan when he penned 24 pairs of pieces each in a different key.

Bach addressed his celebrated work to eager students and cultivated musicians, for them to browse in at their convenience and leisure. Rarely, even in modern times, is the complete set of 24 diptyches played through in a public performance. Yet it is precisely such a synoptic performance that will bring out the work's amazing variety of expression and mood; its vast range through all phases of feeling, from a brisk delight in muscular playfulness, through harrowing depths of personal introspection, up to heights of grandeur unsurpassed in music.

For 50 years after the master's death Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier was known mostly through the circulation of manuscript copies, only to a rather small circle of musicians in central and northern Germany. It began to be printed, in various editions, in Germany and elsewhere, from the year 1800 on. Only after that time was the work available to wider groups of people. But it was precisely in the 19th century that the direct feeling for the contrapuntal practices and the sectional patterns of Bach's day was at its lowest ebb. Many people now studied the Well-Tempered Clavier, but they tended to think of it as a sort of fabulous fossil, a skeleton of a musical mastodon, as it were; with certain exceptions, it affected musicians with a kind of cold awe rather than with love. Inevitably students got themselves enmeshed in its structural complexities and could rarely extricate themselves to get at the emotional values that these were intended to serve. We of the 20th century flatter ourselves that we have arrived at a truer and more direct appreciation of what Bach had to give. Bach's counterpoint and form are more compatible with the procedures of modern music, we do not need to labor over them with such preoccupation; we understand easily that the fugues are marvels of tonal design and joinery, but beyond that we can now feel clearly their muscular and visceral dynamism. We now perceive directly that the Well-Tempered Clavier is less an ingenious labyrinth than an emotional power house.

This matter is linked with the question of playing Bach on the pianoforte. We have already stated that Bach could hardly have imagined a modern piano. For one thing, the piano strives for an ideal of tone-quality quite different from that which Bach's contemporaries thought desirable. Developed mostly during the 19th century with its overbearing sentimentality and with its fondness for heroic concert virtuosity, the piano aims at a rich, mushy, fuzzy kind of sound capable of an enormous volume. Yet its quality remains dull by comparison with the crisp, sharp little impacts provided by the harpsichord. If the harpsichord tried to prick the ears cleanly, as with pins, the modern piano often tries to smother them with tremendous blows, as with cushions.

Playing Bach on the piano, then, is a sort of translation. Yet people can be greatly moved by a thought when it is translated into their own familiar language, who might be left cold by an original dialect to which they were little accustomed. The King James Bible may occasionally render the original tongues inexactly, yet hundreds of thousands of persons are inspired by it for every one who can directly savor the Greek and the Hebrew versions.

A good translation must make smooth idiomatic sense in the language into which the translation is made; translated harpsichord music must also sound like plausible piano

music. Therefore the resources natural to the modern piano must be used in playing Bach – with discrimination, to be sure. Flexible shadings, sharp accents, and, yes – the pedal, must all be put to use, even though these things were not available to Bach’s harpsichord. I feel that, although the tone of the modern piano is not thoroughly suited to the nature of much of Bach’s thought, nevertheless it can realize certain emotional values with more vividness than can the instruments that the composer actually had in mind. Thus in making this translation my aim is to avoid a futile literalness, or making of a lifeless archeological restoration; but rather to animate as many living values of the music as is possible, by the use of means other than those available to the composer. Moreover, I attempt to express the relationship of the preludes to their corresponding fugues through mutual assimilation of their respective moods and movements, rather than through their contrast. I have no authority for this beyond my own notion of fitness.

The second series of Preludes and Fugues, known as Book II, was compiled, so the historians agree, in 1744 – 22 years after the first series. We say: compiled; we cannot with assurance say: composed. There is some evidence that a few of the numbers of each series were sketches in a more primitive form before the compilation of the entire set. An educated, sympathetic scanning of Book II seems to cause many persons to feel that it reveals a more subtle maturity of style, congruous with the greatly later date of its appearance.

Granted the evident parallelism of both Books’ general layout and scheme, it is nevertheless interesting to take note of certain inessential differences between them, as well as of certain less obvious, intimate – one could almost say “personal” – affinities that many of the pieces in the two Books have for each other. Among the differences we may remark the following:

For Book II the composer apparently had in view an instrument of slightly wider range than he did for Book I. The music of the earlier series is rigorously contained within the four octaves between the first C below the staff of the bass clef and the first C above the staff of the treble clef. In fact the limitation is so strict that in a few cases the composer has felt himself forced to bend a passage out of its logical thematic shape in order to allow it to fit his keyboard. On the other hand in Book II the bass once or twice goes down as low as A, three lines below the bass staff, and as high as D flat three spaces above the treble staff. Furthermore, in Book I only a single one of the Preludes, the one in B minor, is shaped in a two-part pattern, with a double bar at the end of each part, and both parts to be repeated. In Book II, however, no less than ten of the Preludes are in this general form. Moreover in Book II there are no fugues for two or for five voices; all are three-voice or four-voice.

Among the aforementioned “intimate” affinities of the two Books: the one that impresses me the most – although I realize that it may be a matter of my own interpretation – is the way the key, the tonality itself, seems to suggest a certain mood to Bach; so that there appears to be a remarkable emotional similarity between a considerable number of the Book II Preludes and Fugues and their counterparts in the same key of Book I. Think of the serene amiable smoothness of both the A flat majors

and both the B majors, the light-hearted playfulness of both F majors and both F sharp majors, the dashing brilliance of both E minor Fugues and both D minor Preludes, the poignant bloom of both the D sharp minor Fugues. I say: the tonality calls forth to the composer its own proprietary mood – but in some cases it even calls forth a definite thematic similarity! Note, for example, the resemblance of the motives of both B flat minor Preludes, or the curious manner in which the first measure of both A flat major Preludes is made up of the identical notes. These resemblances are not close enough to be thought intentional, yet the fact that they are unintentional seems to make them even more significant.

No absolutely unalterable single authentic text of the Well-Tempered Clavier will ever be determined. Three, possibly four, manuscripts exist, more or less complete, in Bach's own handwriting. Other manuscripts exist, in the handwriting of members of Bach's family and of his pupils, also affording a measure of presumable authenticity. They all differ from each other in certain respects, and it seems that Bach asserted the composer's right to change his mind about many little things each time he made a copy, or had one made. There is, in any case, no reason to think that his later thought was necessarily better than his earlier. I play for the most part from the text worked out by Dr. Hans Bischoff, whom many musicologists nowadays seem to regard as having been the most painstaking of all the Bach editors, and to whom most of the important manuscripts and early prints were available.

My I mention two small liberties that I am so bold as to take with the text: 1) When a note is written to be tied or held for so long a period that it runs the danger of becoming inaudible, I sometimes strike it again rather than allow an important harmony to become mutilated. This practice is not an example of my own self-willedness: it was recommended by J. J. Quantz, the close friend and associate of Bach's second son. Moreover, 2) in just a few of the Preludes and Fugues, I attempt to make the very end – the last few notes including the final cadence – more emphatic by playing the lowest voice in octaves. This is an analogy with the use of a 16-foot stop often employed for a similar purpose in playing the harpsichord or organ. I hope it will not prove offensive.



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